

Algerian Nationalism in the 1940s through Italian Foreign Ministry Archive Documents

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Abstract:

This research analyses in detail the documents held in the Historical Archive of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerning the Algerian political situation in the 1940s. In particular, it deals with the rise and rise of nationalism, which led to the war of liberation in the 1950s. The motivations, choices, and positions of the primary Algerian and French political leaders are discussed, alongside with the consequences resulting from their decisions, particularly in view of the Second World War's end.

The text also emphasizes France's efforts to provide Algeria with a fresh administrative and economic organization to avoid granting independence. In addition to the main protagonists of the events, the figure of the Italian ambassador in Paris, Pietro Quaroni, stands out. Given his profound professional experience, he was able to predict what the dramatic developments of the situation would have been if France had not found more effective solutions than those implemented and had not listened to the libertarian demands of the moderate Algerians.

Keywords: Algeria – Italy – independence war – diplomacy

1. Introduction

In 1830, during the reign of Charles X, the French began occupying Algerian territory, a campaign that took roughly fifty years to finally achieve military victory². From a cultural and religious perspective, it cannot be claimed that French domination was complete, despite Paris's assimilationist policy. Algeria retained its own identity, distinct from what the rulers aimed to impose, as the country was Arabised in language and customs and Islamised in religion. It was a land of colonisation rather than conquest, characterized by the violent suppression of rebellions³ and the leisurely settling of colonists in coastal and urban regions; there were no daring expeditions or military conquests to expand territory.

Within four decades of the initial arrival, the population of French settlers had surged to 130,000 and in just over a century, reached one million. Despite legislation introduced in 1865 to expedite French citizenship applications, only 2,500 Algerians chose to avail themselves of this opportunity up until 1934⁴.

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² See Cornevin, R. & Cornevin, M. (1966). *Histoire de l'Afrique*. Paris: Payot, pp. 245ff.

³ Cf. Calchi Novati, G. (1998). *Storia dell'Algeria indipendente. Dalla guerra di liberazione al fondamentalismo islamico*. Milano: Bompiani, pp. 18-37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

2. Algerian Nationalism

Algerian nationalism underwent various stages and comprised different components. These ranged from the assertion of equal footing with the colonisers⁵, to the plea for emancipation while maintaining a friendly relationship with France⁶, to the ultimate fight for independence⁷. The participation of Algerians alongside the French during the First World War⁸, and even more significantly, the defeat of France during the Second World War, diminished the impression of French power. This fuelled the Algerian nationalist movement with the conviction that the time had arrived to demand their long-awaited independence. It was clear that the project of emancipation by force was distant; the battleground remained the political-constitutional one.

In March 1943, the Manifesto of the Algerian People was presented to the French administration. It outlined nationalist demands, including an Algerian Constitution that would ensure freedom and equality for the entire population, irrespective of race, religion, and culture, economic reform, the immediate and effective involvement of Muslims in governing the country, and the release of political prisoners⁹. The appointment of General Catroux as governor of Algeria on 3rd June 1943 highlighted the French's drastic position towards the initiative, which the mother country did not welcome. General Catroux was a firm believer in the colonial system and the necessity of restoring order in Algeria after the war and Allied actions resulted in upheavals.

The speech given by General De Gaulle in Constantine on 12 December 1943 highlighted the actual scope of France's prepared provisions. As the leader of the French in the fight against the Germans, De Gaulle announced a comprehensive plan of reforms, which did not oppose the assimilationist principles proposed by the National Liberation Committee. There was a widespread belief that a decisive policy of assimilation, accompanied by a series of social laws, would not face significant obstacles.

In March 1944, the first wave of reforms was introduced, providing 80,000 Algerians from the upper classes with complete civil rights while still adhering to their personal status regulated by Sharia, the Islamic law. The reaction to this was unfavourable from the colonists who were against any form of support towards the local population. Similarly, the Algerians were unhappy with the possibility of independence becoming more difficult to achieve. A convergence of interests and actions arose among various nationalist factions. Within a week, an agreement was established by Ferhat Abbas, Messali Hadj, the ulema, who were experts in Koranic law, and proponents of militant Islam. This agreement was formalised in the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberties (AML) movement on 14th March 1944.

3. The role of Charles De Gaulle

During a period of fluctuating promises and rigidity, De Gaulle declared in August 1944 that the French colonial empire would be reconstructed as a federation. This would include representatives of the colonies on an equal basis and an economic development program that did not exclusively benefit France¹⁰. De Gaulle's plan offered only slightly less autonomy than that which the nationalists had requested: a federated republic allied with France. However, the colonists believed the concessions would only reinforce the impression of the mother country's weakness.

⁵ Among the promoters of this line were the assimilationist Mohammed Bendjelloul, one of the founders in 1927 of the Federation of the Elected and in 1938 of the Algerian Franco-Muslim Union.

⁶ Leader of this current was the young Ferhat Abbas, who in 1938 created the Algerian People's Union. One of the most detailed biographies on Abbas is that by Stora, B. & Daoud, Z. (1995). *Ferhat Abbas. Une autre Algérie*. Alger-Paris: Casbah Ed.-Denoël.

⁷ Although Calchi Novati has difficulty designating them as 'nationalists' (cf. Calchi Novati 1998, p. 41), it was mainly the 'young Algerians,' who were raised in a French cultural environment around the turn of the 20th century, who expressed this desire. The Algerian People's Party's position, established in 1937 by Messali Hadj, was also extreme. One of Benjamin Stora's works is dedicated entirely to this significant representative of French nationalism: cf. Stora, B. (2004). *Messali Hadj*. Paris: Hachette.

⁸ Calchi Novati notes that 170,000 Algerians fought in the army of their motherland, resulting in 26,000 killed and 72,000 wounded. Additionally, 100,000 individuals relocated to France for war-related economic activities (Calchi Novati 1998).

⁹ See Favrod, C. H. (1959). *La révolution algérienne*. Paris: Plon.

¹⁰ Press bulletin 178, 6.08.1944, Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (hereinafter ASMAECI), Segreteria Generale 1945-1951, b. 18.

The expectations fuelled by the citizenship decree of 7th March were anticipated to cause unrest leading to the decree's repeal itself¹¹. Major riots indeed erupted during the Second World War commemorations, an occasion for Algerian nationalists to demonstrate support for their country's independence. The uprisings were followed by a campaign of repression that was excessive, as it was based on the idea that a firm hand could rapidly suppress a still-developing decolonisation movement¹². This included the destruction of villages, arrests, deportations and the suppression of political parties.

4. The political path of nationalism in Algeria

In the first French Constituent Assembly elections held on 21 October 1945, only Bendjelloul's moderate party represented Algerians. Following a general pardon in March 1946, the nationalist leaders who had been incarcerated in 1945 were released. Abbas seized the chance presented by the unsuccessful referendum for the first constitution on 5 May 1946 to establish a new political party that could safeguard Algerian interests during the second Constituent Assembly elections. Thus, the Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto (UDMA) was founded, winning the majority of votes on 2 June 1946 and securing 11 out of 13 available seats for Muslim representation. The Italian diplomats viewed the triumph of Abbas's party as an event of great significance.

Destined to have significant consequences on the French Empire as a whole, it was akin to a sudden revelation for those tasked with regulating the organization of the varied and numerous peoples residing under the French flag for the foreseeable future. For the first time in the development of the French Empire, the notion that the native people of overseas territories could be connected with the destiny of the metropolis, but could not participate in its internal politics, gained prominence¹³. Consequently, a UDMA representative was elected to the Commission for the new Constitution, proposing alterations to the Empire's governing bodies.

Although representatives of other colonial countries had previously held positions in the French Parliament and had the authority to make decisions concerning the fate of France, the Commission proposed the establishment of a National Assembly and a Council of the Republic reserved exclusively for French citizens. Furthermore, the Commission advocated for the creation of a Parliament of the French Union, open to representatives from the entire empire, which would facilitate cooperation on shared issues while allowing for a significant level of internal autonomy. "This shift in direction is likely due to the push for autonomy, if not complete detachment from the mother country, and the resulting spread of a desire for independence throughout the vast empire. France, in its current state, is ill-equipped to handle the changes in this ever-changing world"¹⁴. One may have questioned whether the colonial system was nearing its end, as indicated by Vittorio Zoppi, the Director General for Political Affairs of the Italian Foreign Ministry, in the margins of a report on the situation in Algeria during the summer of 1946.

The issue arose because the French were reluctant to draw the appropriate conclusions. In response to Algerian political demands, they formulated proposals for economic reforms, with the belief that reducing the misery and consequently, mitigating the negative effects suffered by the locals due to the war- would lead to harmony.

5. The consequences of the II world war

A telegram from Paris re-sent from Rome to the foreign representations reported:

*The conflict has assuredly caused severe hardships for the Algerians, particularly from a material perspective [...] and the Muslims, who are disadvantaged and have a higher population, have certainly been prompted by events to reassess the benefits of being part of the French Republic. And it is understandable that they felt a need to distance themselves from a foreign country that had caused them so much harm*¹⁵. The report concluded that France was 'making a significant effort to enhance the Algerian economy. However, it raises the

¹¹ See Cantaluccio, F. (1991). *Formazione della nazione algerina*. Milano: ISPI, p. 107.

¹² On the issue of repressions in the Sétif region, see *ibid.*, p. 108.

¹³ Telex 12/24502/C, 24 luglio 1946, ASMAECI, Affari Politici 1946-50, Algeria b. 1, f. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Telex 12/27973/C, 21.08.1946, ASMAECI, Affari Politici 1946-50, Algeria b. 1, f. 1.

*question of whether Algerian autonomism, a political movement that emerged from misery, will be weakened or emboldened by the abundance France wishes to supply to the country*¹⁶.

In the national election, Abbas allowed Messali Hadj and his new Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Freedoms (MTDL) to prosper, gaining 5 out of 15 seats, although a plebiscitary victory was anticipated. The Algerians were divided in the election, despite the local Communist Party's efforts to establish a single National Front, which resulted in a reduction of their power¹⁷.

The varying methods employed by different political groups precluded the possibility of unity. In the second constituency, the Communist party secured two seats while the Independents, who were more moderate and favoured cooperation with France, obtained eight seats. In the first constituency, comprising French citizens and Algerians with equivalent political rights, 11 seats were won by those advocating for the maintenance of ties between Algeria and France. The Italian chargé d'affaires in Paris, Benzoni, believed that the colonists had acted dishonestly in the elections to serve their own interests. It was evident that the Algerians favoured Abbas's federalist solution over Hadj's independence alternative¹⁸. However, the French exhibited unprecedented measures in Algeria, even detaching significant military reinforcements from their occupation of Germany¹⁹. The outcome of the vote was irrelevant. Benzoni noted that factual evidence did not support the need for mobilisation, yet from Paris, the desire to prevent any attempt at separation remained paramount²⁰.

It was apparent to international observers that although federalism was the dominant solution, even among the native population at that time, Algerian nationalism was moving increasingly towards independence, beyond the confines of the French Union.

According to Italian sources, the North African attitude was considered separatist rather than autonomist²¹. Meanwhile, the British perspective held that France needed to act quickly and with political savvy to prevent Abbas's followers from throwing their support behind Algeria's complete independence.

The Italian Ministry of Defence made broader assessments a few months after the elections in Algeria. According to the military, the French North African game involved not just the locals and the motherland²², but also the Arabs who were favourable to the natives due to tradition and religion, and the Anglo-Americans who were keen on attracting Africans to their side to create a defence bloc up to the Middle East and exploit Saudi oil²³. Benzoni affirmed that France's empire had been sustained up to that point 'solely because America and England wanted it' and due to the 'blessing of others'²⁴. Any conjecture on immediate dismantlement would be premature. The unresolved query was 'when' rather than 'if' it would occur. It must be noted that the religious element, which was an integral part of Islam, played a significant role in forming an Algerian identity in the relations with the Arab world.

6. The role of the Arab League

However, the League, created for the development of a pan-Arab and Muslim world, had to consider a range of factors, both internal and external, specific to individual nations at that time. For Algeria specifically, this meant acknowledging the country's legal status as an integral part of France's metropolitan territory (internal), as well as the influence of the United States on the Arab League, resulting in a tendency towards an anti-French stance only so far as it did not openly offend the West (external).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Cf. Julien, C. A. & Ageron, C. R. (1979). *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine*, vol. II, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, pp. 379ff.

¹⁸ Telex 26/470/151, 15.01.1947, ASMAECI, Rappresentanza a Parigi 1861-1950, b. 372, f. 1.

¹⁹ Telex 106/1261/338, 3.02.1947, *ibid*.

²⁰ Telex 337/4214/1173, 12.04.1947, *ibid*.

²¹ Telex 37297, 09.11.1946, ASMAECI, Affari Politici 1946-50 Algeria b. 1, f.1.

²² About the relationship between the new-born Arab League and the North African Countries, see telex 356/4612/1286, 29.04.1947, ASMAECI, Affari Politici 1946-50, Francia, b. 11, f. 1.

²³ Secret memo 177, attached to the secret report 109036/3-4, 12.03.1947, *ibid*.

²⁴ Cf. Bagnato, B. (2012). *L'Italie, la France et la guerre d'Algérie. Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporain*, 425, 44.

The newly appointed Italian ambassador to Paris, Pietro Quaroni, in April 1947 predicted:

The League's support towards the Arab population in French North Africa is set to intensify. However, this assistance is not expected to become overtly anti-French as long as relations between France, the UK, and the US remain amicable.

If a new international situation arises due to the ongoing Soviet-American contrast and France's position changes towards the two dominant Western democracies, the League may change its attitude towards France. It remains uncertain if France would continue to be under Anglo-American guidance, if it would become free from it, or if it would align with a pro-Russian stance. In one way or another, there are valid reasons not to vigorously pursue the union of all Arabs from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, so desired by [the League] leaders²⁵.

7. The Communist in Algeria

Meanwhile, the Franco-Vietnamese war cast a shadow over North African affairs. Although the conflict appeared geographically remote at the time, politically it was not too distant. To some extent, the reverberation of ongoing and historic wars prompted Algerians to pursue more moderate resolutions, seeking legal avenues devoid of violent uprisings or severe insurrections against France or the French Union²⁶.

Confronted with such perils, Paris acknowledged the need to devise fresh solutions to the Algerian crisis, and thus sought to prevent the escalation of the issue by designing a constitutional law - the 'Organic Statute'. The various aspects were thoroughly negotiated among the political parties, as each had prepared a proposal for the matter, striving to discover a lawful resolution that aligns with their aims. The resulting text, as anticipated by Quaroni, would be a 'compromise' and therefore would not completely satisfy any of the parties. Nonetheless, it would enable France to delay, at the very least.²⁷

In reality, the French had less time than they had anticipated. The Algerian deputies placed significant pressure on the Ramadier government, leading to the drafting of a bill by a special committee and its presentation by Interior Minister Depreaux in the summer of 1947. The proposal suggested that Algeria would remain a part of the French Union, under the authority of a Governor-General. An assembly was established to represent Algeria to the central government. Algerians were dissatisfied since the assembly would not bring true autonomy or equality with the French. The colonists fiercely criticized the creation of the assembly, fearing Muslim predominance. The 'Statute of Abandonment', as it was pejoratively called by the pied-noirs, was introduced as part of the 'long-lace' policy to placate Algerians while deferring the resolution of the North African issue²⁸.

In addition to purely colonial motives and the prestige of the Empire, there was also a concern for the internal balance of French politics²⁹. In fact, the Communist Party aligned itself with the demands of the Algerians, hoping that native representatives would increase in the first constituency in the future. This was precisely because they hoped to obtain more votes than the other French groupings with the support of the Muslim population. Their extremist actions did not yield any results, neither causing any divisions within the Socialist Party in France-despite disagreements amongst its members- nor bringing about any significant reforms for Algeria.

Nevertheless, there were widespread concerns about Moscow's impact on anti-colonial policy in Algeria, with Quaroni noting the persistent fear of 'nationalist-communist alliances' in the Arab nations of North Africa, which were deemed to be at the root of the French Union³⁰. De Gaulle also criticized the perilous alliance of 'nationalism and communism'. During his visit to Algiers in October 1947, he drew attention to the consequences of the approval of the new law during the debate on the Statute. He stated: 'The policy conducted by the Soviets does not meet the needs of French security and overall peace.'

²⁵ Telex 106/1261/338, 3.02.1947, ASMAECI, Rappresentanza a Parigi 1861-1950, b. 372, f. 1.

²⁶ Telex 356/4612/1286, 29.04.1947, ASMAECI, Affari Politici 1946-50, Francia, b. 11, f. 1.

²⁷ Telex 507/6325/1755, 12.06.1947, Rappresentanza a Parigi 1861-1950, b. 372.

²⁸ Telex 625/8202/2209, 19.07.1947, *ibid.*

²⁹ Telex 727/9640/2564, 25.08.1947, *ibid.*

³⁰ Telex 684/8800/2372, 7.08.1947, *ibid.*

It is in French Africa where separatists are making one of their most significant efforts to dismember', argued the general, denouncing 'the disintegrating murders of communists from within and without, cloaked in indigenous pseudo-nationalism'³¹. With the debates around the Algerian Statute concluded, the political struggle remained as bitter as the upcoming municipal elections approached in mid-October. On the contrary, they became the ground for a genuine nationalist and ideological battle.

8. The political parties in Algeria

The two major political parties, the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Freedoms led by Messali Hadj and the Democratic Union of the Algerian People's Manifesto led by Ferhat Abbas, centred their election campaign on opposing French colonialism. The MTDL's victorious 65 percent majority in the second constituency comprised entirely of Algerians created centrifugal momentum, while almost half of the voters abstained in protest against imperialism. Thus, even Abbas's followers had shifted towards the independence trend by the end of the campaign, abandoning the moderate, pro-autonomy stance within the French Union. This trend was becoming prevalent. The results in the first constituency, however, were starkly different. It comprised settlers and narrow categories of natives, where the Gaullist camp was victorious, firm in its determination to uphold French sovereignty over Algeria. Two opposing extremisms were confronting each other after the moderate autonomy had been abolished. The outcome of the polls had been influenced significantly by religion, as Hadj had taken on the role of champion of Islam, whereas Abbas was less devout. This was a part of the broader strategy of the Arab League for the independence of all Muslim territories, particularly Palestine³². However, even the religious aspect was not an independent factor, as analysed by Quaroni in February 1948:

If the Anglo-Saxons succeed in consolidating their position in the Near East and also in the politico-military field through sustaining their oil policy by overcoming the Palestinian crisis, and if the Marshall Plan, which is largely an emanation of that policy, succeeds, and if the Russian-American contrast is attenuated, at least temporarily, the fading interest of the Arab League in the independence of North Africa, which has already been outlined, will be accentuated. In addition to the hints of moderation they have received lately, local nationalists will receive further new hints³³.

The year 1948 saw the start of the Assembly of the French Union's work, which was delayed on the deadline and scheduled a year after the promulgation of the new Constitution. The initial session did not commence favourably as only the French representatives of this assembly were elected, whilst those from related states, departments and overseas territories were yet to be assigned. In Algeria, the delay of the elections was caused by the cancellation of the Oran elections for the local General Councils, which were supposed to designate representatives to the Assembly. However, the main reason was the increasing differences between colonists and Algerians. Challenges to the Union were also widespread, as it was perceived as a Super-State designed to keep its components united in a regime of controlled freedom³⁴.

The organizations themselves were at risk of being ineffective due to the lack of unity among their members. Could France successfully utilise them as instruments for progress? Only then could the vast military and economic resources required for the Empire's survival actually achieve the desired stability. The effectiveness of the Union was enhanced by the presence of representatives from overseas countries who were able to raise questions about freedom. Additionally, the French demonstrated the ability to react in a flexible manner to both internal and external pressures, despite the Union's initially rigid defensive structure. However, uncertainties emerged regarding whether the stability of the former Empire took precedence over the necessity to uphold peace, despite the frightening prospect of another global conflict looming over the French. It was raised as a concern whether the new legal arrangement's primary goal was maintaining stability. However, the varying circumstances that France and its colonies encountered during the war accounted for this. The atrocities witnessed in Europe did not impact the French in Africa; rather, the restoration process began from there. Therefore, Algeria perceived itself as the saviour of the motherland, with its moral support, financial aid, patriotism and military capability. This allowed Algeria not only to survive after the defeat, but also to resume the war and lead it to victory³⁵.

³¹ Telex 916/11997/1170, 15.10.1947, ASMAECI, Affari Politici 1946-50, Francia, b. 12.

³² Telex 2454/678, 10.11.1947, Rappresentanza a Parigi 1861-1950, b. 372.

³³ Telex 285/2735/753, 24.02.1948, ASMAECI, Affari Politici 1946-50, Francia, b. 19, f. 1.

³⁴ Telex 37/198/87, 7.01.1948, *ibid.*

³⁵ Telex 2173/337, 30.04.1949, ASMAECI, Affari Politici 1946-50, Algeria, b. 1, f. 8.

Whilst there may have been some suspicion in France regarding the necessity of retaining the empire, the colonists themselves were completely unaffected by such doubts: the preservation of national prestige was an absolute priority, regardless of any cost. The doubts were indeed confirmed during the fraudulent April 1948 elections for the first Algerian Assembly. The results of the previous consultations were dismissed, with the Gaullists maliciously triumphant in the first constituency and the pro-French moderates in the second.

The Union in Algeria was born dead as an attempt to engage the local populations. However, it remains unclear who was responsible for its demise, with potential culprits including the French authorities, the colonists, and the Algerians themselves. Perhaps all three: The French authorities had previously appointed the socialist Naegelen as the governor-general in Algiers earlier in the year, as he advocated for a policy in favour of the mother country through the use of force, replacing Chataigneau³⁶ who was accused of being too lenient towards the locals. The colonists had consistently opposed any solution that threatened their prerogatives, even numerically. The Muslims firmly believed that the only true conquest was that of independence, while the Arab upper classes were apprehensive about the consequences of a communist victory. On the other hand, given the threat of a third world war, the question of whether to grant Algeria its freedom became a risky political move, particularly for the mother country which recognised the strategic value of the region³⁷.

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³⁶ Cf. Crevaux, P. D. (1948). *Yves Chataigneau, fossoyeur général de l'Algérie*. Alger: Les Éditions nationales; Parodi, A. (1972). *Notice sur la vie et les travaux d'Yves Chataigneau 1891-1969*. Paris: Institut de France, Académie des sciences morales et politiques.

³⁷ Telex 2173/33730.04.1949, ASMAECI, Affari Politici 1946-50, Algeria, b. 1, f. 8.